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# Transfer students bleed purple too

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Transfer Students Bleed Purple Too:  
The World of James Madison University's College of Education Transfer Students

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An Honors Program Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Education  
James Madison University

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by Katherine Elizabeth Ford

May 2016

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Educational Foundations & Exceptionalities, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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## PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the Senior Honors Symposium, Madison Union Ballroom on April 15, 2016.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this Thesis to all of the students who made the courageous decision to transfer institutions. I hope that you overcome any challenges you face and continue to succeed to your fullest potential.

*“I have found that many of my best students are transfer students. They are usually more focused and diligent, motivated, and socially aware. It is refreshing to have their perspective, which brings maturity and life experience to the classroom.”*

*—Jennifer González, Professor and Chair, History of Art and Visual Culture, UC Santa Cruz*

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## **Acknowledgements Page**

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A special thank you is dedicated to the transfer students of James Madison University: the students who took the time to answer my survey questions and the transfer veterans for sharing their experiences and giving verification to my results.

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### **Abstract**

This research study investigated the transfer student process in the College of Education at James Madison University. A survey was conducted to analyze the transfer student process using both quantitate and qualitative information. Twenty-two transfer students responded, giving perspective on the academic, social/cultural, and psychological challenges faced during their transition to James Madison University.

Results of the data analysis showed that the greatest problem in the transfer process lies in the area of poor academic advising. Non-transferrable credits, unnecessary class enrollment, and prolonged graduation dates are three of the top academic issues transfer students face. Socially, transfer students feel isolated from their new peers due to preformed cliques and lack of involvement. Students that joined campus organization were more likely to feel like a part of the JMU community. Many transfer students struggle financially, making employment a necessity. Lack of time is a major contributor to lack of involvement in transfer students.

## **Introduction**

For my Honors Research Thesis I investigated the world of transfer students in the College of Education, who struggle with the transition to a new academic environment. I wanted my research to make a difference so the purpose of my Senior Honor Thesis at James Madison University was to assist the College of Education (COE) in creating a more welcoming and engaging academic and affective (social, emotion, psychological) experience for its transfer students. The objectives for my project were as follows:

- To create a survey that helped identify the issues affecting the academic and social transition experience of transfer students in the College of Education.
- To analyze the quantitative and qualitative data collected through the survey.
- To write a brief report/analysis on the findings gleaned from the Transfer Student Survey that could assist the College of Education in addressing the academic and social transition experience of transfer students.

These objectives stem from extensive research done by other colleges and universities on the experience of transfer students and their analysis of the transfer student process. In order to have a better understanding of the issues that affect the academic and affective experience of transfer students, I searched for articles and studies from a variety of sources. According to Laanan (2001), community colleges serve approximately 10 million students a year, a large majority planning to attend larger universities. Gard, Paton and Gosslein (2012) found that in the years 2006-2007, more than 35% of United States post-secondary students enrolled in community college. This number has only increased since this study, due to a financial struggles



in addition to a variety of other reasons. Further research in 2010 showed that at least 44% of all undergraduate students in the United States attended community college. Therefore, it is crucial that schools implement a transfer process that addresses the academic, social and psychological needs of the transfer student to ensure a transition experience that provides empowerment, success and visibility to these students.

As stated earlier, the first step in this process to improve the transfer process was to create and conduct a survey identifying the issues affecting the majority of transfer students in the College of Education. The *Transfer Student Survey* helped identify two of the key factors: academic advising and social/cultural issues. The collection and analysis of this data provided the College of Education with important information that can help address the academic and affective needs of transfer students by helping to answer the following three questions:

- What are the issues that make academic advising a challenging process for COE transfer students?
- What are the social/cultural issues that make the transition experience difficult for COE transfer students?
- What initiatives and support can the COE provide its transfer students to help address the advising challenges and the social/cultural issues that affect their experience as JMU/COE students?

The firsthand responses from the transfer students in the COE, along with the research and studies performed by other colleges/universities provided insightful information that was

helpful in addressing a transfer process that can meet the needs of these students so they too can have a successful and meaningful college experience.

## Literature Review

The overarching concern of the articles and research I found was the same: that community college (or other institution) students who transfer to a four-year institution face various new academic, environmental, and psychological challenges. These obstacles are not being effectively addressed by orientation or advising departments, who are more focused on the transition process experienced by the typical freshman student who arrives on campus every August.

### *Academic Factors*

One main reason students struggle academically when transferring to a new institution is “transfer shock.” This phenomenon refers to the temporary decline in students’ grades and overall academic performances when they get to a four-year school. This can be attributed to many different issues, but according to the Laanan (2001) in the article *Transfer Student Adjustment*, the two main issues are:

- The drastic difference in academic standards from a community college to a four-year institution.
- Institutional differences, including size, location, academic rigor and competition among students.

Transfer shock is experienced by 79% of transfer students, yet 67% usually make some sort of recovery (whether it be full or partial) within the first year (Diaz 1992). Although their grades may improve with time/adjustment, transfer students on average take considerably longer periods of time to graduate than native (students who enter as freshman) students of the university. Many

transfer students are not aware of the time they need to allow for, which results in another major academic problem transfer students face: academic advising.

Lack of communication/knowledge between advisors of community colleges and four-year institutions is a leading cause in impeding a successful transition to a new university. However, the majority of the blame falls on the academic advising of community colleges for being unaware the requirements of universities. In a study by Ornelas and Solorzano (2004), 83% of the students surveyed agreed that the four-year university did a satisfactory job advising them upon admission. However, 58% believed that their community college advisor did an extremely poor job preparing them for their new school prior to transferring.

As a result, students are taking classes at community colleges that will not transfer because they do not meet the requirement of the four-year institution's curriculum plan. Colleges need to be more aggressive in helping students limit the number of courses that transfer as electives, and they need to focus on courses that meet general education or program requirements (Laanan, 2001). This is a big contributing factor to why transfer students, on average, take a longer time to graduate. As a result, they are required to take extra classes, something that could have been avoided if their community college advisors were more knowledgeable of the curricular requirements of the four year institutions where students will transfer. This also can be very discouraging for these students, because they will most likely have to work twice as long to graduate.

A student's advising experience can have a dramatic effect on how their four-year school experience unfolds. Upon entering community college, 81% of students have claimed they want to achieve a bachelor's degree or higher. However, only 25% of these students actually go on to

achieve one (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). A better advising experience could potentially lead to an increase in the number of students that obtain their bachelor's degree or higher.

### *Social Factors*

Although succeeding academically at a new school is extremely important, it is not the only factor to consider when addressing the needs of the transfer student. The environment at a new, larger school is often drastically different from the community college setting due to location, diversity of the school, involvement in clubs, etc. Very often, transfer students do not know how to go about getting immersed in their new environment. According to Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994), “personal adjustment and integration into the social fabric of campus life plays a role at least as important as academic factors in student retention” (281). However, transfer students do not receive nearly as much attention as native students when they first arrive at the institution. Therefore, “students who transfer to the university must acclimate themselves with their new institution without as much assistance as is often provided to new incoming students, including becoming familiar with their instructors, staff, new friends, and other varying nuances of the institution” (Roberts & McNeese, 2007, 4).

Research has shown that the relationships transfer students build with faculty members can help ease the trauma of the transition experience. However, it is up to the transfer student to build this relationship (Astin, 1993). Most often, current friend groups and cliques have already been established when transfer students arrive. Transfer students have little in common with current students at the universities to which they transfer and usually find it difficult to connect with other transfer students (Kuh et. al, 2005). Tinto (1993) holds that many students who transfer to the university from junior and community colleges will be much more limited with

their involvement and engagement in campus activities, learning experiences and interactions with other students.

Four-year universities need to improve their transfer student process so transfer students are better integrated into the community. It is vital for the success of the transfer student to be involved in campus events and feel like they are valued and needed within the community of the school, and not be there just to get their degree and leave. Universities need to assist transfer students in finding opportunities that will help them find their place in their new institution. When students feel connected and involved with their institutions, they are more likely to persist and graduate especially if there is a dedicated faculty/staff appointed to advocate for transfer students and help them become active members of the university community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### *Psychological Factors*

When transfer students struggle academically and environmentally in their new institution, this can lead to significant psychological problems as well. When students experience transfer shock, it can lead them to believe they are not as smart as the students that surround them. It is important that students maintain a positive self-image and learn how to cope in situations where they may initially fail (Jean, 2000), especially because transfer students are more likely to end up on academic probation early in their transition experience than native students (Graham & Dallam, 1982).

Transfer students often feel isolated when they first attend their new university. They are not familiar with the people at the school, the social norms of the school, and values. When entering a four-year university as a freshman, everybody around you is going through the same

orientation experience and the anxiety and confusion that often takes place, so the students get to go through the learning process together. Transfer students do not get this experience. Racial and ethnic minorities encounter additional stressors not typical of nonminority students (Gard, Paton, Gosselin, 2012). An unhealthy amount of stress is associated with the transfer process, especially when it comes to the social component of the transfer experience.

### *Financial Factors*

Aside from having the psychological stressors of academic and social life, family influence can contribute to this as well. In a study by Ornelas and Solorzano (2004), students admitted how unsupportive their families were in their transferring to a four-year school. This lack of social capital stemmed from families encouraging full-time work and immediate income over higher education. This same study reported that almost 50% of students stated that neither of their parents had a high school degree; the majority of these students were the first in their families to go to college. Many families fear that they cannot afford the expenses that come with getting a degree from a four-year school.

Seventy-five percent of these students reported that their non-college educated parents earn an income of less than \$30,000 a year. Once students transfer, they are exposed to the shocking price difference between community college and the university. Although college is expensive up front, its long-term effects, especially financially, are very rewarding. The economic analysis finds that college graduates ages 25 to 32 who are working full time earn more annually—about \$17,500 more—than employed young adults holding only a high school diploma (Pew Research Center, 2014). However, students' lack of knowledge about scholarships, grants, and financial aid creates even bigger problems (Ornelas & Solorzano,

2004). Advisors at community college are not making students aware of these financial help opportunities, leading many of them to not be able to afford the costs of the university once they are admitted.

Because students are experiencing the family stress that comes from financial concerns, a majority of them work their way through school, either through work study programs or independent jobs. According to a news release by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2006, 49% of all four-year college students aged 16-24 were employed midway through the fall semester. Their need to work led to a lack of flexibility in scheduling their classes. This also impeded their graduation date, sometimes having to drop classes to pick up more hours or travel to their current job. The lack of family support and financial means can be psychologically traumatizing for a newly transferred student.

Overall, there are many contributing factors that cause transfer students to be faced with heavy challenges upon their arrival at new four-year institutions. Although universities cannot fix how much money transfer students have available for their education or find friends for them, they can, at the institutional level, implement a better process to make the student more integrated into the school academically, environmentally, and psychologically.

### *Effective Initiatives*

To address the problem of transfer students taking non-equivalent general education courses, each summer UCLA holds a one week *bridge program* for students intending on transferring to UCLA. These students are made up of those currently enrolled at community colleges and high school students planning on going to community college. During the week, while residing in campus dormitories, students meet with professors and advisers, attend lectures



and seminars, and gain familiarity with research and the academic community (College Board, 2011). They also get to strategically plan and map out their transfer process and timeline, as well as choose classes that will transfer to fulfill class requirements at their community college. At the end of the week, “these students begin to see themselves as UCLA transfer students and they enter a community college with a plan of action that is essential for ultimate academic success” (College Board, 2011).

Admission and outreach leaders at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill start preparing prospective transfer students while they are still in high school, as well. This allows students to enter community college with a plan and in a better, less-stressed mindset. This helps them begin and continue on a set academic track. In addition, the UNC program allows these future/committed transfer students to participate in Chapel Hill campus activities while they are still community college students. This way, students can join organizations (intramural sports, Greek life, etc.) and be involved in the social and cultural environment of the school before they arrive. This gives them time to make friends (potentially future roommates), become familiar with the school and its cultural norms, etc. As a result, when the student makes the permanent switch to UNC, they have already been assimilated into the community.

As mentioned earlier, lack of instructive advisors/transfer information is one of the biggest obstacles students experience when transferring schools. There is a lack of communication and understanding of requirements between the community college advisors and the four-year university advisors. In recognizing this problem, University of Arizona regularly sends their advisors to the neighboring community colleges. As a result, the students have accurate information about their transfer institution and its requirements. These visiting advisors increase the community college’s overall advising capacity, demonstrate the commitment of the

four-year institution to community colleges and establish credibility — in the student's eyes — for the transfer process (College Board, 2011).

Taking advisor communication one-step further, Virginia Tech has appointed representatives that are in charge of visiting every community college in the state that requests their presence (Virginia Tech Guaranteed Admission Agreement, 2013). These advisors meet with students individually, review their transcripts, and map out a plan for a successful transfer (i.e. which Math/English/Science classes to take for credit transfer). Once students fulfill these requirements, they can meet with the representatives when they return to the school in the upcoming semesters and be admitted to Virginia Tech on the spot. If the students have not fulfilled the requirements, Virginia Tech works with the student until they achieve the requirements that are needed.

Having advisors from the desired transfer institutions be present on the community college campus eliminates any confusion on what is required for a successful transfer process. These advisors plan out an academic schedule for students, eliminating that aspect from the community college advisors' job. Then, their main priority can be to advise students on when to take the classes, not what classes to take. This is beneficial to both community college advisors and the university advisors. Community college leaders welcome these advisers on their campuses. It eliminates the uncertainty inherent in the current transfer process (College Board, 2011).

In most cases, financial issues are what cause families to be unsupportive of pursuing higher education and cause transfer students significant stress. It is no secret that the price difference from community college to a four-year school is drastic. Syracuse University has decided to treat all transfer students ages 24 and under as *dependent* students, just like all

incoming freshman, even if their parents have stopped providing for them. This policy reduces the need for transfer students to borrow more expensive private loans and provides resources for room and board since many independent students live off campus and are not charged directly by the institution for these expenses, (College Board, 2011).

Georgetown University offers more Federal Work Study opportunities to transfer students than any other school (College Board, 2011). Their president states, “This program allows students to take a job on or near campus — with decent wages — keeping them more closely tethered to the campus.” There are many options for transfer students to get financial help (dual enrollment, scholarships, funding), yet none of this helps if they are not aware of the opportunities. Students planning to transfer should be required to meet with a financial counselor just as they would an academic counselor. The change would help make transfer students aware of their financial options going forward.

## **Methodology**

This study investigated the struggles and issues that the College of Education (COE) transfer students face when they come to JMU. The idea for this study grew from the concerns I observed from classmates who were transfer students during my EDUC 310 Diversity course with Dr. Ruthie Bosch. Hearing the struggles they endured, particularly through poor advising and unclear requirements, made me want to investigate how to improve this process for incoming JMU/COE transfer students in the future. Dr. Ruthie and I met to discuss the idea of doing some research on the experience of transfer students around the country. After that research, we worked on a Transfer Students Survey that would provide the COE with insights into the most challenging aspects of the transfer students' experience. More importantly, we believed that the results of the survey could help create initiatives in the COE that could provide support to transfer students so they can have the same high quality academic and social experience that the other COE students have.

The students in this study were students in the College of Education who transferred to JMU from community colleges and larger universities. One student in particular transferred here from the University of Miami and expressed deep concerns about her social adjustment. A handful of the students from the study had transferred directly from Blue Ridge Community College. Blue Ridge has the Guaranteed Admission Agreement, which allows students to follow a schedule of classes that should lead to their acceptance to JMU. These students are required to make particular grades in certain classes so they can be directly accepted. Students in this program at BRCC had particular concerns about the lack of communication between the advising departments at both JMU and BRCC. JMU failed to accept credits for many of the classes that

BRCC students had taken, causing them to stay longer to finish their bachelor's degree. Students who transferred from other community colleges had similar problems pertaining to advising and transfer credits.

This planning and design of the study, the creation and implementation of the survey, the collection and analysis of the data took place over the course of four semesters. To ensure that no student would endure any discomfort throughout this survey, the survey was completely anonymous and did not contain controversial questions. The items we included in this survey were modeled after transfer student surveys used by other schools and adjusted to fit the context of James Madison University.

The data was collected through the Transfer Student Survey (see Appendix A). Some of the survey items came from survey questions created by other researchers and educational institutions. A study by Laanan (2001) in *Student Perceptions* shows that universities need to focus more on the social adaptation of students. In addition to this information, a study performed by Townsend (1993) indicated that, there is a perceived lack of communication between transfer students and their advisors. We devised a list of key areas the survey would focus on:

- **Advising Experience:** clarity of requirements for transfer, knowledge of financial information, etc.
- **Academic Experience:** awareness of what courses are needed to complete selected major on time.
- **Affective Experience:** pertaining to psychological, social and emotional needs.

Some survey items were quantitative, while others were qualitative in nature providing students the opportunity to express themselves through open-ended questions. Through Qualtrics (a web-based survey software tool), we used the mean, standard deviation and frequency to analyze the data. Further research gave insight into the best ways to display the data. For example, *EWU Transfer Needs Assessment Survey Results* showed that demographics of the students answering the questions is best shown by percentages represented as raw data. Also, quantitative questions asked the survey recipients to rate how satisfied they were with different experiences, such as advising and ease of transfer credits. The *EWU Transfer Needs Assessment Survey Results* provided a strong model for representing results as shown in Figure 1.

<b>Advising</b>	Very Satisfied	23.5%
	Satisfied	34.5%
	Neutral	23.9%
	No Opinion	1.7%
	Unsatisfied	16.4%

**Figure 1. EWU Survey Results for Advising**

This table shows the area being addressed and the levels of satisfaction. This table can be broken down even further to display compare the answers between transfer students from community colleges versus students who transferred from four-year institutions.

We used our findings to make some recommendations regarding initiatives and forms of support that could assist future COE transfer students so they could have a more positive and empowering transition experience. In order to get the best possible analysis from the results, we also conducted a member's check. This required a meeting with the Transfer Student Office student advisors to get a better insight into the students' survey responses, personal experiences

pertaining to these matters, and suggestions on improvement. Since they mentor other COE transfer students, these students have a better understanding of the transfer process and experience and were able to provide more nuanced explanations and clarifications of survey responses.

The survey generated both qualitative and quantitative data. These two categories of data were analyzed in different ways. When looking at qualitative data, our first step was to analyze the responses and look for common themes. For example, one of our questions asked the transfer students about their most challenging transfer experience. Looking for overarching, similar themes in this category helped group the data and merge similar response together. From there, these themes were broken down even further into positive and negative feedback. Some students may have had a very positive transfer experience; others may have had a more negative one.

The quantitative data dealt with numbers and statistics, not written responses. We used Qualtrics to conduct the survey. It was crucial for us to use the right techniques to analyze the quantitative data. For example, we did not use the mean (average) to make conclusions on this categorical data because it is not an accurate representation. To analyze the quantitative data, we used frequencies (i.e.: 17 out of 30 students said...) or percentages (i.e.: 55% of students answered...). When analyzing the quantitative data, it was important to look and see how long students spent on the question/survey. If a student took under a minute to complete the survey, it was highly likely their responses were not accurate. Therefore, entries with a very minimal timespan were carefully reviewed to determine their accuracy. It was also important to look at the total responses for each question. If nearly 100% of the students responded to a certain open-

ended question, it is clear that this is a topic they were passionate about and had opinions on. This was a clear indicator of a significant problem/issue in the transfer process.

Aside from conducting the survey, we held a member's check (interview) with veteran transfer students. These students have been through the JMU COE transfer process before; therefore, they provided us with insight on their experiences as well as suggestions for improvement. The insights from both these veterans and the survey respondents are written in *italics* throughout this thesis.

After all of the data was collected and analyzed, the final step was to relate our conclusions from the survey back to the literature review. Making these connections and formulating conclusions helped us have a more informed understanding of what we could do to improve the transfer process for students in the COE.



## Analysis of the Data

The literature review showed that students who transfer to a new, four-year university face many academic, environmental, and psychological challenges. Issues in these same categories arose during the analysis of the data collected by the survey that was sent to the College of Education (COE) transfer students.

The survey we created was sent to all of the transfer students currently in the COE. In total, there are approximately 73 transfer students currently in the program. Out of these 73 students, 22 of them responded to the survey. Of the students who responded, the majority had transferred in either Spring or Fall semester of 2015. We believe this may be a reflection of how difficult the first year of transfer is. It is possible that by the time transfer students reach their second year at JMU, they have been able to develop strategies to navigate the academic and social aspects of the school, and hopefully find their home.

The survey items at the beginning of the survey addressed students' experience of how their transfer institution provided information about and effective assistance in their transfer process. When asked about the effectiveness of the advising they received during their transfer process, 18 out of the 22 respondents stated that the advising process needed "some or a lot of improvement." One student explained, *"I felt as though I was on my own to figure out all the information on the process and scheduling."* The dissatisfaction and frustration with the quality and effectiveness of the advising was a reoccurring theme throughout the survey data collected. Students voiced their frustration with the lack of communication between their transfer institution and JMU on what classes were required for them to be able to fulfill the JMU requirements needed to graduate. As the research from Laanan (2001) stated, colleges need to be

more aggressive in helping students strategically choose the electives they take; students need to focus on courses that meet general education or program requirements.

A majority (sixty-seven percent) of students shared that advising, specifically on transfer requirements, needed improvement. One student had to take three extra semesters at JMU because *“half of the courses I took at my community college did not count as credit toward my undergraduate degree.”* This led to both psychological and financial problems, causing her to feel extremely behind academically even though her credits were equivalent in number to other graduating students. Several other students expressed similar concerns. When asked to explain the most challenging advising experience, responses included *“trying to figure out what classes I needed for my major;”* *“playing catch up that I never knew I needed to do;”* *“unaware of certain classes I could have taken ahead of time”* and *“finding out concrete graduation requirements.”* This really highlights the need for an improved transfer program between community colleges and JMU. This issue is the main reason why it takes transfer students, on average, a longer time to graduate.

When asked to reflect on positive advising experiences, many students could not think of something to write. Out of the 19 students who answered this item, 9 stated that they either had no helpful advising experience or that their most helpful advising information came from someone other than their advisor (i.e. a person they had to seek out). Students noted that they received the most assistance from *“a secretary in the department,”* *“a helpful professor,”* and *“other transfer students who had been through this process.”* Transfer students who are outgoing and confident individuals might have no problem seeking out help on their own, however, students that introverted or lack confidence will struggle immensely if they do not

receive accurate information. Because they will fear asking for help, they will follow the inadequate or incorrect advice or information they are given, which has a detrimental effect on their academic careers.

In the literature review, a study by Ornelas and Solorzano (2004) found that 83% of the students surveyed agreed that the four-year university did a satisfactory job advising them upon admission. According JMU's COE transfer students, the advising they received was highly unsatisfactory:

- 14 out of 22 (64%) said JMU advisors needed to improve in making the transition to the campus easier and more fluid.
- 15 out of 22 students (68%) said JMU needed some/a lot of improvement in the area of advising help *after* the transfer.
- 17 out of 22 students (77%) stated that information given about required courses needed significant improvement.

Another recurring theme was the issue of “required courses.” Students expressed concern that there were too many requirements to keep track of: general education, major, and minor. One student suggested a more lenient transfer protocol when it came to general education courses; they were puzzled by why “Communications 100” at their community college would not suffice for the required “GCOM 101” general education course at JMU.

When asked about helpful advising experiences, many students commented that when they had a concrete and accurate written out “game plan” on what courses to take, they felt much more comfortable. Yet, for some transfer students even having a game plan is not helpful because in that game plan they are not informed that some of the classes they need to take are

only taught during certain semesters. As one student wrote, “*My advisor did not tell me that some classes are only offered once a year.*” This transfer student had to stay an extra semester because her advisor did not provide her with this very important piece of information. As this example vividly demonstrates, the accuracy and quality of the information that an advisor provides can make or break a transfer student’s academic experience.

Many of articles in the literature review talked about “transfer shock.” This is the phenomenon that refers to the temporary decline in transfer students’ grades and overall academic performance when they get to the four-year school. Although many transfer students who took the survey talked about the difficulties of scheduling or meeting requirements, none of them commented on the increased difficulty of the actual classes. When asked about the academic aspect of their transition to JMU, the students responded that the academically they “*did not think the transition was extremely hard.*” A handful of students commented that they had trouble with a certain course or two, but they were able to find tutoring and assistance for those courses easily.

A majority of students expressed frustration that their hard-earned 4.0 GPAs from community college were not transferable to JMU. They experienced “*pressure and stress during their first semester*” to get good grades so they could earn a high GPA during their first semester at JMU. This shows that students transferring to JMU are not necessarily going to struggle academically if given the right administrative help, but unfortunately, there is discrimination regarding transfer students’ work ethic and their ability to handle rigorous academic work. One student wrote about the discrimination he felt when he was “*told by a faculty member that transfer students do not have the same vigorous study skills because they went to community*

*college.*” This stereotype is promoted and accepted by JMU native students and faculty causing transfer students to feel like second-class citizens who are seen as less capable of doing the academic work and succeeding in the classroom.

The environment of a school like James Madison University is very different than that of many community colleges. The school has a larger campus, population, and more extracurricular involvement. As Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) stated, “personal adjustment and integration into the social fabric of campus life plays a role at least as important as academic factors in student retention.” JMU always encourages involvement in the school, and this survey shows how important that is in the transfer process. Eleven students of the 22 respondents got involved very soon after transferring, in activities ranging from Greek life to sports to academic clubs. All of these students who have become involved say that JMU has felt more like home to them because “*it forced them to get out of their comfort zone early on.*” Fifteen out of 19 students agreed that they have felt accepted or found their niche or community at JMU, which is extremely important. However, the remaining transfer students who did not seek out involvement say they still feel like an outsider at JMU.

As discussed earlier, there is a set of norms at JMU that is foreign to students just beginning their journey. When one enters JMU as a freshman, there are thousands of students in the same position and together they learn the lingo and phrases used by students. They start learning the “invisible curriculum” together, meaning the unwritten/unofficial cultural norms, lessons and perceptions students learn in the school environment. They are expected to ask questions and not know many things. On the other hand, transfer students do not have thousands of other students with whom to adjust or acculturate into the JMU culture. Many of them feel

very alone and too embarrassed to ask. One student admitted she “*had no idea what HHS meant for the longest time*” and another “*had no idea how to utilize the bus system.*” Apparently, native students are not extremely helpful or encouraging in this transition process and often “*make transfer students the butt of jokes when they do not understand a certain aspect of the JMU culture.*” Transfer students often feel they have little in common with native students at the universities to which they transfer and usually find it difficult to connect with other transfer students (Kuh et. al, 2005). One student confided that he/she “*often does not tell people that I am a transfer student because others see him as less academic and unable to share similar experiences.*” Transfer students feel like “*second-class citizens*” at JMU. Because they transfer their junior year, when they come to JMU peer groups are already established so finding social fit can be extremely difficult, especially for those students who are naturally introverted. The survey results show how getting involved and building relationships seems to be the best way to find a niche at JMU.

When asked to describe the aspects of the transfer process that made the transition easier, 93% of students talked about people they met and getting involved. They describe how, once they are settled at JMU, they had to rely on the people around them to feel included. Relying on friendships was very important. One student stated that “*the only way I made it through to be comfortable at JMU and find my way was the people I lived with and friends I made in classes and through organizations.*” Some students were lucky enough to “*have a number of friends already enrolled at JMU*” and “*transfer to the school with a close friend.*”

Besides peer friendships, student-teacher relationships are shown to be vital as well. Building relationships with professors “*can help in so many ways because they understand the*

*struggles and answer questions you have.”* As the literature review showed, the relationship transfer students build with faculty members can help ease the transition/stress of the transfer process. The fact that it is up to the students to form these relationships can be difficult to those students who are introverts and for whom stepping outside their comfort zone can feel very scary.

Although joining a club or organization to make friends might seem like a simple solution, this often is not an option for transfer students. Fifty-three percent of the students in this survey said they work while going to school. For many transfer students, this is a necessity due to the large difference in price between community college and JMU. One student even feared that his identity as a transfer student would lead to others viewing him as “*unable to financially afford four years of school at a university.*” Of the transfer students surveyed, those that hold jobs work an average 15 hours per week besides being a full time student. Some students work as much as 30 hours per week. Although many want to get involved in school organizations, students feel that “*many clubs are pricy to join*” and that “*there isn’t enough time to join between working maximum hours and excelling in school.*” Many of the transfer students surveyed have to balance a life of school and work, which can be extremely difficult (especially when it comes to scheduling). They feel that those students who are fortunate enough to have school paid for by their parents usually take such a luxury for granted. Sixty-nine percent of these transfer students had to take out loans to afford going to JMU, which is “*an added stress on top of maintaining a good GPA.*” Although there was no comment on the level of family income or support, it is clear that the majority of these students are paying their own way through school.

Overall, the transfer students' advice to future transfer students highlighted the main themes, both negative and positive, of the process. The biggest suggestion given was to meet with the JMU advisors as soon as you decide to transfer. A *“concrete game plan of what classes to take in which semester”* is going to be the key to success. Getting left behind can easily happen if you are not *“proactive upon transfer.”* However, most students noted that it is important to *“check with other advisors in the program to make sure the information is correct.”* Many students have been given incorrect advising information by both, their transfer institution and JMU, causing a delay in graduation. When asked if the JMU professors understood the academic needs of transfer students, 11 of the 19 students believed they did not making miscommunication between transfer students and their advisors a serious issue that negatively affects the transfer experience.

*“Get involved and step out of your comfort zone”* are two important pieces of social advice students give. One transfer student stated:

*“You have to get yourself out there. You have to find a way to make the kind of friends you want to have, and get involved in a community at JMU. These are the people that will help shape both you and your experiences at JMU. No one deserves to be lonely.”*

JMU offers many opportunities for students to find their niche. If transfer students do not have the time or money to join a club, finding a job can be an excellent way to make friends. This can help both their financial and social situations. Students in this survey explained how they met their best friends working campus jobs, such as the COE's Transfer Student Advising Office (TSAO) and the Planetarium. They believed getting involved was vital and that there is something at JMU for everyone if one takes the time to find it.



Although the transfer process can be traumatic at first, transfer students in the survey wanted the new transfer to know that *“I promise that with time it gets better.”* Even though the majority of these transfer students expressed many concerns and problems, 79% said that at this point in their transfer experience, they feel they have found a home within JMU. As one student stated:

*“Be your own advocate. If you don't know what to do, ask. If you're shy, break out of your shell. There is a tremendous opportunity to grow at JMU, but you have to initiate it.”*

## Conclusions & Recommendations

Our recommendations and conclusions directly answer the three important questions of our research.

***Research Question #1: What are the issues that make academic advising a challenging process for COE transfer students?***

Transfer students in the COE face many academic and social challenges upon entering JMU. In interviews, transfer students expressed frustration that professors and students at JMU assumed that their transfer student status means they have never experienced academic rigor. This misconception can create problems between transfer students and their JMU assigned advisors, because students believe that their advisors often hold them to a lower standard and believe they cannot take on a demanding workload. This results in a poor advising relationship where transfer students feel they are not being allowed to decide for themselves how many credit hours they want to register for, especially during their first year at JMU. Research in the field shows that transfer students are no different than native students when it comes to their intelligence, goals and motivation, but JMU advisors often have a misconception of transfer students. As a result, students feel their advisors' attempts at communication are awkward causing a majority of them to change advisors multiple times a year, creating instability in their academic experience. This in turn affects the quality of the academic advising itself.

Through the survey and interviews, transfer students expressed how there is miscommunication between departments, specifically the COE and Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies (IDLS) programs. Advisors in each department are giving students conflicting advice regarding the required classes students need. When questioning students on whether they

received a plan of work (POW) that outlines what they need to take every single semester in order to graduate, students explained how their advisors *did* draft this for them, however, they were completely inaccurate. The advisors in different departments gave them completely differing POWs, causing them to take an excessive amount of unnecessary classes. Similarly, advisors told them not to take classes they later discovered were a graduation requirement. Transfer students have been known to change advisors frequently. As one student said in my interview with her, *“I have changed advisors every year; never has there been consistency in my academic instruction. The worst part was that none of them were helpful.”* Since transfer students change advisors frequently, some of them end up having 3-4 different POWs per year, all containing different information about required classes. As a freshman, my advisor gave me a “roadmap” or POW with the classes I had to take each semester to fulfill my graduation requirements on time. Without this clear and accurate POW, I would have definitely felt lost. It is very important for students to feel confident and knowledgeable about the academic path they have to travel, but providing them with an “academic roadmap” that has incorrect information will not help them in their journey. This lack of communication between programs/department and the conflicting and often incorrect POWs given to transfer students result in extended graduation dates that create serious financial and psychological problems for transfer students.

JMU and the COE can address these issues by implementing a program such as UCLA’s *bridge program* which targets students currently enrolled in community colleges who have already committed to transferring to UCLA upon completing transfer requirements. This program takes place during one week in the summer. During that week, students live in the dorms, meet with their future professors/advisors and observe classes to get a feel for the academic environment. Most importantly, transfer students and their UCLA assigned advisors

map out their transfer process and the UCLA class schedule they will follow post-transfer. Students are given a specific list of the classes they need to take to meet the transfer requirements of the UCLA departments and programs where they are planning to apply. Transfer students who participate in the *bridge program* have an increased confidence in being successful in their academic future at UCLA.

Virginia Tech takes the premise of UCLA's *bridge program* for transfer students a step further through their *Guaranteed Admission/Direct Transfer Program*. Virginia Tech has advising representatives who will visit any and every community college in the state (if requested). These advisors meet with students interested in transferring to Virginia Tech and map out a plan for a successful transfer (both at their present and future school). These representatives are trained to have accurate information on transfer credit courses and class requirements for programs/departments across campus. Developing this level of advisor expertise eliminates the possibility having transfer students take unnecessary or wrong classes. Once students fulfill the required community college classes, they are directly admitted into Virginia Tech.

***Research Question #2: What are the social/cultural issues that make the transition experience difficult for COE transfer students?***

Being the new student at any school is never easy; the social and cultural norms are brand new and many groups have already been formed. Through the survey and interview data collected, transfer students described how they had a hard time finding their niche at JMU and feel uncomfortable asking others for help. Transfers were never given a map (the "mappy" that all first years are given) or the OneBook, which is a guide of all the steps new students should take to prepare for a successful transition to JMU. These two artifacts are a mainstay of

freshman orientation and are very important in helping freshman students navigate the JMU world during the first few weeks of school. Transfer students are given an book at orientation, however is isn't nearly as comprehensive as the OneBook for incoming freshman. As a result, some transfer students walked to school during most of their first semester of classes instead of taking the bus because they were never taught how the transportation system works and they were ashamed or too embarrassed to ask for assistance.

Transfers students felt that the Transfer Student Orientation, in its present form, was unhelpful and poorly organized. It mostly consisted of students sitting in an auditorium watching videos. They had dedicated student "ANTS" (Assisting New Transfer Students) that did little to nothing to help the transition. The ANTS were well intentioned, but they were not able to provide helpful answers to the many questions the new transfer students had. The planned icebreaker games the transfer students had to participate in were more humiliating than fun. Transfer students are not freshman students and because their academic journey and life experiences they have different needs and require a different kind orientation to prevent them from feeling academically, socially and culturally isolated from the JMU community.

The survey results and the interviews support research findings that most transfer students who enter four-year universities have to work different jobs to pay for their education and as a result their free time is very limited. This lack of time makes it difficult for transfer students to get involved at JMU. Although lack of time is an issue, so is the transfer students' lack of knowledge regarding what social events might be available if they wanted to take some free time to decompress. Transfer students are not given a list of clubs or organizations they can join. Most of them have never heard of Student Organization Night (which happens every

semester to introduce students to the clubs on campus). The issue is not that JMU does not have enough involvement opportunities for transfer students, but that no one is communicating these opportunities to them which hinders their chances for a successful social, and psychological transfer experience. Yet, even after facing so many obstacles, transfer students described how much more “at home” they felt after putting themselves out there to make friends and get involved, especially when they were able to find other transfer students who can relate to the unique journey they have in common.

Whether it is lack of time, confidence, or lack of information, transfer students are often hesitant to get involved at JMU. Often, this is due to the pre-formed cliques that have originated during their peers’ freshman year. To address this issue, UNC Chapel Hill has developed a pre-transfer involvement strategy. Because many students enter community colleges out of high school with the intent on transferring after 1-2 years, UNC Chapel Hill allows future/committed transfer students to participate in/join campus organizations. If a student at the local community college plans to earn his Associate’s Degree and then transfer to UNC Chapel Hill, as a first year community college student she can join in UNC Chapel Hill’s intramural sports, academic clubs, fraternities, etc. Hence, when she makes the transfer to UNC Chapel Hill’s campus, she already has made friends, been involved, and is familiar with the school. This makes the social/cultural transition to the school much less stressful and much more meaningful and engaging for the student.

***Research Question #3: What initiatives and support can the COE provide its transfer students to help address the advising challenges and the social/cultural issues that affect their experience as JMU/COE students?***

When students transfer to JMU, their main goal is to succeed academically and graduate within a given time period. Unfortunately, JMU advisors are ineffective in helping transfer students reach this goal. These students need to have a *clear* and *accurate* POW. One way of addressing this issue is to have a COE faculty/staff member who can develop expertise on the class requirements from the different COE programs and can become the official advisor for all transfer students in the COE. This faculty/staff member would be up to date with any curriculum changes that would affect class requirements in a program/department. This will eliminate having transfer students with the different POWs they are given at different times and by different advisors. This transfer student COE advisor could also act as a liaison between the COE and the neighboring community colleges.

The COE could have a modified program similar to UCLA's *bridge program*, where a qualified and knowledgeable JMU faculty member can become a Professor in Residence at Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC) for one semester. This faculty member could help students map out the classes they need to take to ensure that all their community college credits fulfill JMU and the COE requirements. This will make transfer students "enter community college with a plan of action that is essential for ultimate academic success" (College Board, 2011). This would address the most pressing issue transfer students deal with: taking the right classes to fulfill requirements. This would help them feel more on track, motivated, and ready to take on their new academic journey at JMU.

Besides improving the academic transfer process for transfer students, there are social improvements that could be made as well. COE transfer students should get a "mappy" and an OneBook during their orientation day just like the incoming freshman do. During the

interviews, transfer students were shown the OneBook for the first time. Their responses were variations of *“this would have helped me so much when I first transferred.”*

To address the issue of transfer students finding it difficult to feel included in the groups their peers might have formed as freshman, JMU could adopt UNC Chapel Hill’s program and allow students from BRCC who intend/commit on transferring to JMU, to join JMU clubs and organizations. UNC Chapel Hill has seen tremendous results and an improved happiness and inclusion rating from transfer students. If transfers could partake in academic clubs, intramural sports, Greek Life, etc., they would already have formed friendships by the time they came to the university. Transfer students would not feel embarrassed by asking for help they would already have friends to consult when they did not understand an aspect of JMU campus or culture.

JMU has the reputation for being an amazing, friendly, “door-holding” school and community. As a current senior who got to experience JMU as an incoming freshman, I can confidently say this school lives up to its reputation. I quickly fell in love with my classes, friends, and campus; JMU has become my home. I am graduating in exactly four years, and have never been wrongly advised to take classes I did not need. My academic and social experiences were engaging and meaningful. JMU and the COE need to make changes to the transfer program so JMU can be a place all students can call home. Transfer students deserve to have the same opportunity to be academically successful and feel a sense of belonging at JMU because they bleed purple, too.



## APPENDIX A

### Transfer Student Survey

**The COE is interested in your experiences as a transfer student. Your answers to this survey will help create a better transfer experience for COE students.**

1. Rate your transfer institution with respect to each of the following items.

	Outstanding	Satisfactory	Needs some improvement	Needs a lot of improvement	Don't know
availability of good information about transfer requirements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
availability of advising about transfer requirements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
availability of advising about transfer process	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ease of completing transfer documents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
assistance in filling out JMU admission application	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
timeliness in providing supporting documents for JMU admission application (i.e. transcripts)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Describe the most challenging advising experience(s) you had with your transfer institution.

3. Describe the most helpful advising experience(s) you had with your transfer institution.

4. How would you rate JMU with respect to each of the following aspects of your transfer?

	Outstanding	Satisfactory	Needs some improvement	Needs a lot of improvement	Don't know or Not Apply
availability of good information about transfer requirements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
availability of advising about transfer requirements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
availability of advising about transfer process	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ease of completing transfer documents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
assistance in easing transition to campus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
advising after you transferred	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
special programs to orient you to campus and campus activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
special programs to orient you to academics and academic expectations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
assistance in finding housing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
timeliness of application processing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
timeliness of notification of your acceptance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
providing information about the <b>admission process</b> for your chosen major	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
providing information about <b>general education</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

requirements					
providing information about the <b>admission requirements</b> for your chosen major	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
providing information about the <b>required courses</b> for your chosen major	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. Describe the most challenging advising experience(s) you had with JMU.

6. Describe the most helpful advising experience(s) you had with JMU.

7. Describe the most difficult aspects of your academic transition.

8. Describe what has made your transition easier in any way.

9. Which of these behaviors have you experienced when dealing with stressful situations as a transfer student? (Check as many as apply)

	Never	Sometimes	Occasionally	Very Often	Always
Made an appointment with an instructor to ask for extra help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Avoided appointments with instructor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not attending class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Avoided working with other students (i.e. work or study group)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did not do homework	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Met with my advisor(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asked for learning assistance or tutoring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussed your goals with a peer or mentor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. The professors at JMU understand the needs of transfer students.

- ☐ Agree Strongly
- ☐ Agree Moderately
- ☐ Agree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Moderately
- ☐ Disagree Strongly

11. The professors in the College of Education understand the needs of transfer students.

- ☐ Agree Strongly
- ☐ Agree Moderately
- ☐ Agree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Moderately
- ☐ Disagree Strongly

12. How have professors at JMU or the COE been helpful to you as a transfer student?

13. How have professors at JMU or the COE made your experience as a transfer student more challenging?

14. As a transfer student, I have felt accepted at JMU.

- ☐ Agree Strongly
- ☐ Agree Moderately
- ☐ Agree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Moderately
- ☐ Disagree Strongly

15. In what ways have you felt accepted at JMU?

16. In what ways have you felt excluded/marginalized at JMU?

17. At JMU, I have found a community where I fit.

- ☐ Agree Strongly
- ☐ Agree Moderately
- ☐ Agree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Slightly
- ☐ Disagree Moderately
- ☐ Disagree Strongly

18. Describe what community/communities at JMU have you joined.

19. What is the most important advice you would give to a future transfer student?

20. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your transfer experience?

**We need to ask just a few more questions to aid us in assuring that responses represent a variety of perspectives.**

21. Hometown \_\_\_\_\_

22. Transfer Institution \_\_\_\_\_

23. Transfer Semester \_\_\_\_\_

24. Current Semester Credit Load \_\_\_\_\_

25. Major \_\_\_\_\_

26. Gender M F Other: \_\_\_\_\_

27. Age \_\_\_\_\_

28. Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

29. Do you live: \_\_\_On Campus \_\_\_Off Campus\_\_\_Commuter

30. Work: \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No If yes, Job: \_\_\_\_\_Hrs.\_\_\_\_

31. Financial Assistance (Check all that apply): \_\_\_\_\_Scholarship \_\_\_\_\_Loans

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